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ABSTRACT

A classroom program that has been developed to teach students a variety of basic interpersonal communication skills is described in this paper. The focus of the program is on adding to students' repertoire of skills in order to increase the flexibility of their interpersonal communication and the range of choices in relationships. There are three objectives in the program: teaching a number of skills which students normally do not possess, providing conceptual understanding of the skills as well as behavioral learning, and facilitating transfer of learning to students' out-of-class relationships. In the first section of the paper, the four frameworks taught in the program and the behaviors linked to each framework are taught. In the second section, the various methods by which the frameworks and skills are taught are described. In the final section, the strengths and limitations of the program are discussed. (TS)

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EDUCATION IN BASIC INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS

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EDUCATION IN BASIC INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS

This paper describes a classroom program that has been developed to teach students a variety of basic interpersonal communication skills. The focus of the program is on adding to the student's repertoire of skills in order to increase the flexibility of his interpersonal communication and the range of his choices in relationships. The thrust of the program is threefold:

1. Teaching a number of skills which students normally do not possess.
2. Providing conceptual understanding of the skills as well as behavioral learning.
3. Facilitating transfer of learning to the student's out-of-class relationships.

The first section of the paper will describe the four frameworks taught in the program and the behaviors linked to each framework. The second section describes the various methods by which the frameworks and skills are taught. The concluding section discusses various strengths and limitations of the program.

I. Frameworks and Skills.

A. The Awareness Wheel.

The first framework taught in the course is the Awareness Wheel. This framework helps the student identify the many different kinds of information he has about himself. The framework is shown in Figure 1.

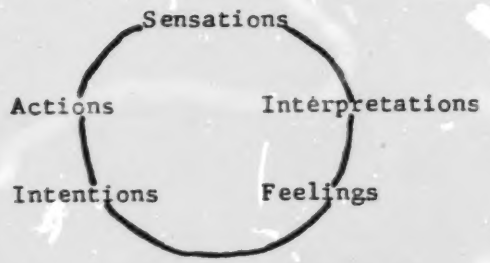

Figure 1. The Awareness Wheel.

The Awareness Wheel is basic to the entire program because it is the pivot upon which the student learns to organize and use his self-information. The framework is used in two ways: First, to help the student organize his self-information and increase his self-understanding; second, to increase his choice about the information he wants to disclose to others.

For this second use, six skills are taught to help the student more effectively express his self-information. The first skill taught in conjunction with the Awareness Wheel is "speaking for self." Substantial emphasis is placed on this skill in order to help the student learn to accept responsibility for his own self-information (i.e., his sensations, thoughts, feelings, etc.), and to increase his comfort in disclosing self-information. The other five skills help the student disclose each dimension of the Awareness Wheel. These skills are the following:

2. Making sense statements.
3. Making interpretive statements.
4. Making feeling statements.
5. Making intentions statements.
6. Making action statements.

B. The Shared Meaning Process Framework.

This framework is taught to help the student increase the accuracy of his communication with others and to provide him with a set of skills to increase his awareness of others. The Shared Meaning Process is shown in Figure 2.

Statement	Sender	Receiver
1	Initial message	
2		Restatement of message
3	Confirmation of accuracy or clarification	
4		Restatement of message
etc.		etc.

Figure 2. The Shared Meaning Process.

The framework essentially describes a process by which accuracy of information exchange can be increased substantially. The goal of the process is to insure that the message sent is equivalent to the message received. Specific skills involved in the process include: for the sender, sending a short, clear, direct message to begin the process, and confirming or clarifying messages; for the receiver, messages reflecting back meanings received. The focus of the framework is on teaching the student that both the sender and the receiver have responsibilities in communication exchanges which are attempting to achieve accuracy.

C. The Communication Styles Framework.

The Communication Styles framework is a modified formulation of the Hill Interaction Matrix developed by William Hill (1965) for analyzing interaction groups. Styles are described in terms of both the intentions typically associated with the style (Figure 3) and the various behaviors used in expressing the style.

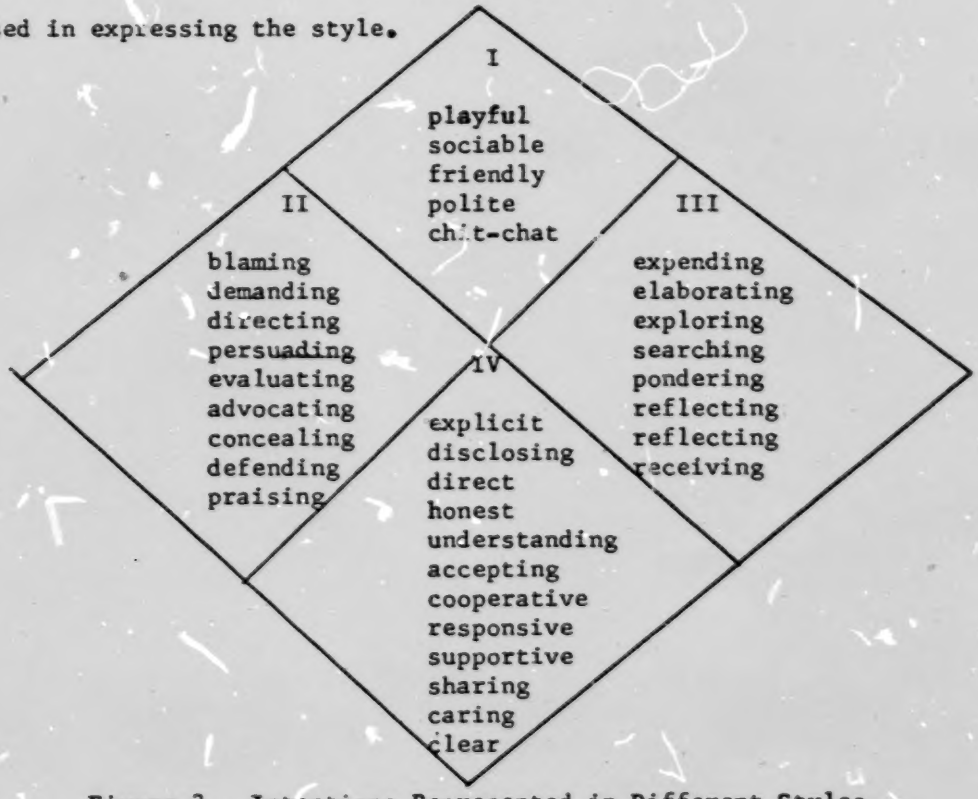

Figure 3. Intentions Represented in Different Styles.

The framework is used to help students identify the kinds of communication alternatives they have and the kinds of impacts different styles have on others. Particular emphasis is placed on teaching students Style IV, which is a new communication style for students. The specific behaviors used in expressing Style IV are essentially those taught earlier in the course.

In conjunction with the communication styles framework, students are exposed to alternative communication patterns in order to clearly indicate to them the interdependent nature of communication with others. Several specific patterns that facilitate or hinder effective relationship building are highlighted, including work pattern communication and several types of impasse patterns.

D. The I Count/You Count Framework.

The fourth framework presented is the I Count/I Count You framework. This framework bears some resemblance to the I'm OK, You're OK perspective developed in transactional analysis. (Harris, 1967) However, it differs in two respects. First, more emphasis is placed on the role of a person and his responsibility in enhancing both his own and other's esteem. Secondly, more stress is placed on the impact of communication in esteem processes. Again, skills used in expressing different counting patterns are drawn for those taught earlier in the program.

II. Learning Contexts and Modes.

Both conceptual and experiemental learning are heavily emphasized in the program. And both kinds of learning are involved in students' experiences in the classroom and outside.

A. In-class experiences.

Learning of conceptual frameworks is facilitated by four methods in the class: (1) mini-lectures presenting frameworks; (2) tape recordings illustrating the frameworks in action; (3) class discussions concerning the frameworks, and their use; (4) group discussions where students are

required to use the frameworks in analyzing communication situations. Typically these group discussions involve providing feedback to other group members concerning the kinds of communication behaviors exhibited during an exercise.

Skill learning is facilitated by two methods in the class: (1) small group exercises; (2) pair exercises. Both types of exercises are designed to help the student use specific skills associated with a specific framework. Typically feedback is presented to the student concerning his communication behavior during the exercise; the great majority of the feedback is supplied by fellow students.

A typical exercise in the program is the following, after students have learned how to more effectively self disclose: Checking Out Exercise. Students pair up, preferably with someone they don't know very well. Pairs are grouped into sets of three. Instructor demonstrates various uses of the skill of checking out in the context of getting to know a student. Particular attention is paid to showing how to get to know something about partner's feelings and intentions. Each pair then tries to get to know each other, using the skills of checking out and disclosing self awareness. The pair engages in this discussion in the small group, then after about 8 minutes receives feedback from group members on the kinds of communication behaviors they were using. All three pairs discuss in front of the group and receive feedback from the group.

B. Out-of-class experiences.

Conceptual learning out-of-class is facilitated by three methods: (1) reading of a textbook, Alive and Aware; Improving Communication in Relationships.* The book is described in an appendix to this paper; (2)

*Alive and Aware is an expanded and elaborated version of the book currently used in the course, The MCCP Couples Handbook, published by

analysis of communication situations which students are required to observe; (3) analysis of the student's own communication in out-of-class exercises.

Experiemental learning is facilitated by having the student participate in out-of-class exercises, whether with a classmate or with another partner chosen by the student. The main purpose of the out-of-class exercises is to increase the transfer of the student's skill learning to his everyday relationships.

C. Evaluation.

Evaluation of student performance is based on his use of communication skills in tape recorded exercises assigned periodically during the course and on the analysis of communication behavior, both his own and other people's. Thus, evaluation consists largely of the student's performance on out-of-class assignments, although several of these are "special" assignments with the student tape-recording his own communication behavior and providing an analysis of it.

III. Strengths and Limitations.

The program has several significant strengths. First, it teaches practical skills which students can learn. The classroom program is based on the Minnesota Couples Communication Program, a program developed to teach married couples how to communicate more effectively. Results from several well controlled studies indicate that the large majority of couples do change their communication behavior. (Campbell, 1974; Miller, 1971; Nunnally, 1971; Schwager & Conrad, 1974) Less systematic research also indicates substantial learning among students from the course.

Second, the program combines heavy doses of experientially-based skill learning with substantial conceptual learning. Thus, the student learns

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Interpersonal Communication Programs, Inc., Minneapolis, MN. 55454. Alive and Aware will be avialable in summer, 1975, along with an instructor's manual describing how to conduct the course.

not only a set of new communication skills but also a set of conceptual frameworks to better understand communication processes in general. And the frameworks provide the student with the concpetual basis necessary to increase his communication flexibility and the range of his choices in relationships.

Third, the close linkage between classroom and out-of-class experience increases the transfer of student learning to his everyday life. The skills and frameworks taught in the class are readily applicable outside the classroom environment, and student's "homework" assignments facilitate the incorporation of these skills and frameworks in the student's everyday life.

Although the course has the significant strengths listed above, there are also some important limitations. First, class size must be controlled. Enrollment should not exceed about 30 students. This limitation will increase the cost of presenting the course. However, such a size limitation is no different than that required in other experientially-oriented classes.

Second, the program is more effective when classes are conducted in two or three hour blocks of time. The 45 or 50 minute time block, characteristic of most standard classes, is simply too short, and tends to disrupt the continuity of the student's learning experience. Specifically, the shorter class tends to result in a feeling of rushing through exercises and feedback discussions.

Third, a rather substantial part of a quarter or semester should be devoted to the program. The skills and frameworks taught in the program build on each other so the full benefit of the program requires at least one-half of a quarter. Certain of the skills have been successfully taught in as little as two weeks of a course, but such a short time has

limited the range of skills taught. Also, it appears that spending too little time on the program tends to decrease the transfer of learning to the student's everyday life. Presently, the program is being redesigned to encompass a 30 hour time block within a course.

Fourth, instructors sometimes have difficulty presenting the program. The basic focus of the program is on communication skills and processes, but some instructors find it difficult to focus student's attention on skills and processes rather than on the content of the communication occurring in exercises. Further, some instructors have difficulty in adapting to the role of a resource person who moves from group to group during the class, helping students retain a focus on communication skills and processes. Lastly, some instructors appear to be uncomfortable with the idea that students themselves provide most of the feedback to each other. Nevertheless, our experience with instructors with whom we have worked in presenting the program in family sociology and communication classes indicates that most instructors can adapt fairly readily to the different kind of instructor role required in presenting the program in the classroom.

For further information about presenting this basic communication skills program in the classroom, write authors at:

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